

FREEDOM OR AUTHORITY IN GROUP LIFE?

Voluntary Agreements Work, Our Experience Teaches Us

OSCAR HANDLIN

IN THE heat of national conflict Americans have often found it useful to turn for insight to the lessons of their history. It may equally be valuable for American Jews to do so in the midst of the present sharply contested struggle within their community life.

In our society, instruments have been

For almost two years Jewish community life has been agitated by a debate over a proposed plan to alter the pattern of control and financing of community-relations activities, the large bulk of which has been the responsibility of two long-established communal agencies, the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith, and the American Jewish Committee. The argument over the work of the specific agencies involved has become overshadowed by a new—and old—dispute over the authority to be vested in coordinating and centralizing agencies in Jewish life; and in turn this has flowered into a full-blown revival of the historic controversy as to whether the welfare needs of the American Jewish group might not be better met through a single over-all representative body empowered to speak for all Jews, and to control all Jewish communal organizations. OSCAR HANDLIN, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and a close student of the evolution of the communal life of Jewish and other religious and ethnic groups in America, focuses his attention in this article on this crucial and basic question, and gives his view as to which of the two positions being advocated seems more in consonance with American conditions and experience. COMMENTARY has published other articles on these questions in the past—we refer readers to Robert Gordis's article "Creating an Organic Community" (July 1950), and Mr. Handlin's articles "America Recognizes Diverse Loyalties" (March 1950) and "Group Life Within the American Pattern" (November 1949). We plan to publish other articles in the future, both on the general question of the organization of the American Jewish community, and on the specific problems affecting the work of Jewish inter-group relations agencies in this country.

developed to provide for the people's welfare of a number, scale, and variety exceeding those of any other country. In much of this development, we have depended upon organizations created by the voluntary association of individuals with common interests rather than upon the operations of government; indeed, the total area of our social life in which government refrains from acting is immense. Such voluntary organizations exist, today as in the past, in an almost endless assortment, reflecting the vast diversity of our people and the wide range of religious, ethnic, and sectional ties that draw groups of us together.

Actually, the voluntary associations give form to the most important actions of our society, now as in the past. Yet the voluntary pattern did not come into being as the product of any premeditated plan or theory. It emerged erratically out of the practical necessities of life on a new continent, as men of different origins were thrust together and confronted the problems of cooperating freely with one another. There was often confusion as to purposes and uncertainty as to functions; and often Americans, some of them leading spirits in such associations, misunderstood the very nature of the institutions they were creating.

It is odd but true that it is the persisting *voluntary* character of these associations that has always evoked the bitterest controversies. Habituated as they were to the political technique involved in the electoral and governmental machineries of a democracy, some Americans were inclined to expect that the majority should rule everywhere, as it did in the operations of the state. But any effort to put that expectation to the test revealed that there was a difference between the member of a church or fraternal organi-

zation and the citizen of a state. The citizen, in the minority on a vote, had to agree to the actions of the majority; otherwise he would feel the force of the power of coercion available to the government. But the member of a voluntary association faced no such compulsion; against any majority he held always the right of withdrawal. Thus whatever power of action such groups enjoy derives first and last from the voluntary consensus of opinion among their adherents rather than through the establishment of a majority.

This quality, inherent in their very nature, accounts for the enormous variety of these associations, for the seeming disorder, overlapping, duplications, and confusion as to purpose, function, and jurisdiction that often characterize their operations. These deficiencies are the price of their spontaneity, freedom, and voluntary character; and considering the spirit they have engendered among the citizenry, and the resulting fruits of their efforts, the price to society cannot be thought high by any comparative standards obtaining in either government operations or commercial businesses.

IN THIS respect, the agencies through which the Jews act in the United States are altogether typical. The immigrants of the 18th and early 19th centuries did briefly attempt to reconstruct the institutions with which they had been familiar in Europe. There the *Kahal* ("Congregation") was at first endowed with a total jurisdiction over the community; it was concerned with philanthropy, with education, and with the personal and social life of its members as well as with God's worship. But the American environment soon narrowed the functions of the congregation to the purely religious, while all the other subjects of communal action fell into the hands of altogether autonomous bodies.

From time to time in the 19th century individuals did express dissatisfaction with the looseness and disorganization of Jewish life in the United States. But the occasional calls for some kind of representative body that would speak for all Jews and impose

discipline on them came to nothing. Even on a local basis, it was not possible to create any form of central authority. On a national scale it was hopeless. When the American Jewish Committee was formed in 1906, it explicitly disavowed the intention of creating a congress on political parliamentary lines, or of representing anyone but its own members.

In the half-century that followed, however, there were a succession of attempts to establish such a central agency under a variety of forms. Those efforts were totally unsuccessful, but a vigorous group continues to further them. The agitated reception of Professor Robert MacIver's recent plan for the reconstruction of the National Community Relations Advisory Council was due in considerable part to the fact that the plan seemed to many, both of its supporters and its opponents, another such effort in the long series. Behind the bitter debate that ended only this fall in the rejection of the proposal by the chief agencies involved, there lurked the fear on the part of some, and the hope on the part of others, that this was the first step in the creation of an authoritative body representative of American Jews. It will be helpful in understanding those hopes and fears to turn back to review the pages of American Jewish communal history, and to review briefly the story of earlier moves in that direction.

IN THE negotiations that ultimately led to the formation of the American Jewish Committee in 1906, Dr. Judah L. Magnes had urged the new body to take a stronger position and to assume the wider responsibilities of a Jewish congress. Dissatisfied with the limited role the Committee actually marked out for itself, he came to feel that the organization he thought desirable could best grow out of the formation of local governing agencies in the important cities. In 1909, he took the lead in the establishment in New York of such a *Kehillah*.

Dr. Magnes clearly stated the purpose of the *Kehillah*. In an address to the organizational meeting, he pointed out that, "At the present time there is no representative, au-

thoritative permanent organization that dare speak for the Jewish people," and he complained that consequently "any individual or organization" could "claim to be the spokesman of the Jews." The Kehillah in New York, and a similar body in Philadelphia, were to put an end to the "prevailing anarchy," at least locally.

The Kehillah never spread to other places; and indeed enjoyed only a short life in New York and in Philadelphia. But these initial tentative trials were symptomatic of the desire in some quarters for greater order and control in communal life.

The First World War offered the opportunity to bring that desire to fulfillment. In the three years while all the European great powers were engaged and the United States was still a neutral, American Jews acquired growing influence and responsibility. With the declaration of war against Germany, it became clear that this country would wield perhaps conclusive influence in determining the outcome of the struggle and the nature of the peace.

Jews certainly had a stake in both. Feroocious battles across the face of Eastern Europe had confronted many in Poland and Russia with immediate problems of relief and rehabilitation. And the treaties, which were to bring democracy and the rights of self-determination to areas of the world that had theretofore known little of either, would certainly have to take account of the needs of the Jews. This was altogether apart from the hope of many Jews that the final settlement would make room for Zionist aspirations in Palestine. It could persuasively be argued that the crisis of the war demanded some single, unified, authoritative body to speak for the Jews in dealings with the American and European governments that would determine the future political organization of a good part of the world.

The call of Dr. Magnes and of the New York Kehillah for the convocation of a congress of the America Jews therefore fell upon receptive ears. It was difficult in the face of these dramatic needs to resist the demand for concord and for directed effort.

THE American Jewish Committee approached the idea of a congress with a good deal of hesitation. It was willing to cooperate in any feasible manner. But it insisted upon hedging its participation in such a conclave with two important reservations. First, it insisted that a congress, if it met, ought to devote itself to specific problems determined in advance. That is, the congress was not to be a representative assembly with general legislative powers, but rather a body limited to specific functions within the areas in which all the participants were in substantial agreement.

Furthermore, from the Committee's point of view, it followed that the congress was to be a temporary and not a permanent entity. Called into being by an immediate crisis, it was to dissolve as soon as the crisis was over and its functions ceased to exist. The Committee stood as firmly as ever, it made clear, on the principle that there was no place in America for anything like "a state within a state."

Although an acrimonious debate revealed the force of the divisions among American Jews, these limiting terms were finally accepted by the various groups that entered the American Jewish Congress formed in 1917. It was with that understanding that the American Jewish Committee took an active part in the labors of the next two years that helped to influence the formulation of the treaties dealing with Eastern Europe and with the situation of the Jews in the post-war world. It was certainly in accord with that understanding that the Congress officially dissolved in 1920 once the treaties were negotiated and its work was ended.

But there had always been a group within the Congress that held no such circumscribed view of its province. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, for instance, refused to acknowledge that this was no more than the *ad hoc* instrument of a specific purpose. He viewed it rather as a continuing organization that would ultimately constitute a general authority over Jewish life in the United States. At a rump meeting after the original Congress had passed out of existence, a group of likemind-

ed individuals assumed the old name and continued to act under it, although with a form, and in a spirit, quite different from that which animated the original organization.

It was a logical extension of the position of those who now controlled the American Jewish Congress that "world Jewry" needed representation in the same way, although on another scale, as American Jewry. It followed, almost as a matter of course, that they created a World Jewish Congress in 1936—a supernational integrating body to coordinate the activities of Jews in every part of the world. In his autobiography, Dr. Wise describes this episode in a chapter entitled, "The Jewish People Lives."

Down to the middle of the 1930's, the American Jewish Congress did not absorb the loyalty of a very large portion of the Jews of the United States. It certainly was never capable of playing the role in the life of the Jewish communities that its organizers had envisioned. Perhaps that was why they had at the start attempted, unsuccessfully, to draw into their ranks such men as Louis Marshall, Jacob Schiff, and Abram Elkus to whom the very idea of a congress was repugnant. In any case, the Congress, like every other voluntary association, was capable of controlling only its own membership and found itself speaking only for those who adhered to its position. At no point was it a body representative of American Jews, or in any sense different in its functioning from other rival agencies.

IT WAS certainly clear, after two decades, that there was as yet no authoritative body to speak for America's Jews. In the 1940's, as another postwar crisis approached, those who still thought such a body essential, still faced the necessity of bringing it into being. Again, as in 1917, the practical pressures of the crisis induced many others to seek some form of cooperation among the organizations dividing Jewish loyalties. But again, the clash between those who believed in voluntary cooperation among autonomous agencies and those who sought unification

under majority rule could not be long postponed.

The renewed efforts toward unity stemmed from the conviction of Henry Monsky, president of B'nai B'rith, that some extraordinary "united Jewish front" was essential in the face of the calamitous problems of the Second World War. In 1943 he invited some thirty-five associations to assemble in Pittsburgh to consider the postwar status of the Jews. Thirty-two of the invited groups met and issued a call for an American Jewish Assembly that would devise a concrete program and choose representatives to implement it in cooperation with delegates of Jews from other parts of the world.

The American Jewish Committee refused at first to participate in this project. Its objections, as stated by Judge Proskauer, were simple. "On principle, the American Jewish Committee is unalterably opposed to any plan that would seem to set up the Jews as a separate political enclave"; and the Assembly seemed, in structure and purpose, to do that. As an alternative, the Committee proposed a conference of groups representing various points of view "to find what areas of agreement exist that ought constitute a common ground for united action. Such a conference would not make any claim to speak on behalf of the totality of American Jews; it would not attempt to bind or coerce its own minorities."

In a series of negotiations through the early months of 1943 the Committee's objections were apparently met by far-reaching concessions. The name of the new organization was changed to American Jewish Conference; and on its behalf Mr. Monsky assured the Committee that, "The right of any participating organization to dissent from, and so dissenting not to be bound by, the conclusions of the Assembly, is recognized."

Yet before the first sessions of the Conference were actually held in August, there were unfortunate indications that these assurances were not literally intended by all the participants. Already in June the pages of the *Congress Weekly* revealed that some individuals were harboring more ambitious

second thoughts on the matter. "Officially the Conference will gather for the limited purpose of agreeing on a program of postwar Jewish demands," the journal acknowledged. But, it went on to say, "Unofficially it is the historic destiny of the Conference to become the promoter of Jewish thoughts and consciousness." Even then the direction of those thoughts was clear. The Conference was to become an "organization in which the collective responsibility of American Israel" would find expression. After all, it was explained, the difference between conference and congress was only technical.

As for the right of dissent guaranteed the Committee, that seemed, in prospect, no obstacle at all. In an article entitled "The Assembly Must Be Sovereign," Charles Sherman made it all clear. "No majority of a sovereign body," he said, "can be induced by threats of withdrawal to submit to the demands of any . . . minorities. The right . . . [of] organizations to withdraw . . . must not be used as a weapon against the majority in spite of the voluntary character of the Assembly. The decisions of the Conference will be accepted by the world at large as the voice of American Jewry."

In the light of these assumptions, it is not surprising that the Conference went down to a speedy and ignominious collapse. On the first consequential test, the majority resorted to the tactics of the political steamroller, and forced through to adoption a resolution repugnant to the minority. Again the victory only exposed the futility of such tactics. Those who won the vote simply forced the minority to withdraw and thereby pulled down the structure of the whole organization. Such, one predicts, will always be the end result of efforts to substitute rule by plebiscites of "the Jewish masses" (generally organized by partisan minorities) in place of voluntary cooperation, operating through a freely arrived at consensus of opinion and mutually agreed upon programs of joint work.

It was against the background of these successive attempts to create an authoritative centralizing agency that the National

Community Relations Advisory Council was formed in 1944 to "serve as a coordinating and clearance agency," seeking areas of agreement among organizations which had already clearly demonstrated their unwillingness to be unified. Its membership included the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Jewish Labor Committee. It was the assurance that its constituents would risk no aspect of their autonomy that permitted the NCRAC to function successfully for eight years. And it was the threat to that autonomy embodied in the MacIver Report and what followed from it that produced the tragic disruption of the NCRAC this fall. In the perspective of the last forty years, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the proposed reconstitution of the NCRAC was the first step in another of the successive attempts to impose the terms of unity upon American Jews.*

THE recurrence of these efforts, and their consistent failure, indicate that these are not simply the products of the successive crises that were their particular occasion. They would seem to reflect deeper, persisting trends in the development of American communal life.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that these are not tendencies particular to the Jews. They seem rather to have asserted themselves in the same years in the experi-

*The recent actions of the National Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds (NCJFWF) strongly support this conclusion. This body, the national organization of the central fund-raising and -distributing organizations that exist in almost every American Jewish community of any size, has been very active in getting the NCRAC to implement the proposals of the MacIver Report; in addition, the Large City Budgeting Conference (LCBC), composed of the central fund-raising bodies of the largest cities (with the exception of New York and Chicago), which initiated the discussions leading to the MacIver Report, was set up and is controlled by the NCJFWF. In some respects, many contend, the NCJFWF and the LCBC are already acting as if they were the fiscal arm of a representative congress, using financial sanctions to secure to its majority the right to act for the entire "Jewish community."

ence of every other organized group in the United States. The parallel with the major religious sectors of American society is impressive. In the very years in which Dr. Magnes worried about Jewish anarchy, other clergymen were troubled by the loose organization of the Protestant denominations and by the absence of any national Catholic organization. In 1908 the advocates of Protestant unity created the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. Between 1910 and 1917, the National Conference of Catholic Charities and the National Catholic Welfare Board were set up, to impose some kind of centralizing authority over the diocesan organization of the church, theretofore largely autonomous and largely self-contained. (It may be added parenthetically that useful as these bodies have been in other ways, they have no more unified Protestants or Catholics than the Congress unified the Jews.) In the past five years, we have again seen a resurgence of movements toward unity among the Protestant denominations.

The problems of unity and authority are not then peculiar to any group, although they take different forms in each. These are problems all Americans have faced in the past half-century. They are aspects of the difficulty of adjusting our pattern of voluntary association to the special conditions of life in modern society. The root of that difficulty is the fact that the voluntary association, by its nature, is not a political entity or a governmental association. It disposes of no powers of compulsion. Yet under the pressure of the hard decades through which we have just lived, individuals and groups have occasionally been tempted to think of these associations as if they were political entities and did have governing powers. Thence the contradictions and the conflicts in practice.

THE drive to endow Jewish associations with quasi-political attributes is no simple one. It is not, for instance, the product of any particular view or philosophy of Jewish life, although it may draw strength from romantic reminiscences at second hand of

what the Kehillah both in Central and Eastern Europe once was. Nor does the drive reflect any deep social divisions among American Jews; a survey of the chief protagonists will show it is not possible to draw a line on this question between the "old" or "German" and the "new" or "East European" Jews. Nor, finally, does this drive spring simply from the desire to democratize Jewish life. There are many areas of social action in which the majority does not rule—in the conduct of a business or a university, for instance, or in the operations of a church or a hospital. Majority rule is a technique for securing justice in the acts of a state; and those who call upon it as a slogan applicable to private associations show thereby that, however unconsciously, they have in mind the transfer of political techniques to non-political activities.

The urge toward unity and centralization in Jewish life would seem to be the product of four different forces. That is its strength and its weakness. The variety of these impelling motives accounts for the frequency with which the issue has been raised in the past forty years. The same variety also accounts for the inability of the disparate elements in successive alliances to hold together over any extended period.

A centralizing authority is, first of all, attractive to people who are impatient with the apparent disorder of spontaneous voluntary bodies. It is no coincidence that this movement emerged in the first decade of the century when efficiency was the key to the solution of every social problem. Alike to the businessman who sees the advantages of "management" in his own operations and to the reformer who has no doubt but that disorder can be planned out of human life, social engineering became then, and to some extent has remained, the magic wand to wave away all difficulties. This "Bull Moose" impulse has repeatedly drawn together radicals and men of wealth in the confidence that the right social plan, applied by government if necessary, can eliminate the confused and inefficient operations of voluntary associations.

There is a sad misunderstanding here of techniques and purposes. President Eliot of Harvard, once advised that a university should be more businesslike, found it necessary to explain that it was not the purpose of a university to earn profits but to spend them. Similarly, it might well be asked whether it is the function of a hospital to be efficient or to cure the bodies of its patients. Is a "defense" organization to be judged by the extent to which it avoids duplication of efforts or by the effectiveness with which it helps create desirable community relations? Regarded from the point of view of ends rather than of means, the spontaneity, flexibility, and versatility of the voluntary associations are an enormous asset, for which there is no place in the calculations of the planners.

Those who object to the inefficiency of organized Jewish life are joined in their objections by a second, quite dissimilar group. Significantly, both Dr. Magnes and Dr. Wise were rabbis who reflected the sentiments of a sector of the American rabbinate that objected to the secular control of Jewish communal life. (Dr. Wise's conception of the "free synagogue" was all too often one in which the rabbi was free to speak and the congregation free only to listen.) Often it seemed laymen, amateurs as it were, had far more power in the determination of events than the rabbi. Perhaps it seemed that some centralized organization would restrain the inclination of any Jewish body to run off at the whim of its own leadership. Certainly the organized rabbinate would be more influential working as a group through such an organization than it was while each rabbi, in his own congregation, was subject to the expressed needs and opinions of his trustees, and in most American Jewish welfare and communal associations and institutions was hardly heeded at all.

MORE important than the impulses already mentioned was a third, that which sprang from the rising nationalist sentiments of the period. This is not the

place to attempt to account for the rise of nationalism among Jews, as among other American ethnic groups, in the years after the First World War. But it was certainly logical for those who thought of "Jewish peoplehood" as a real thing to wish to see that people endowed with political attributes, and in the United States as well as Palestine. Thus it was the Zionists, who anticipated the ultimate emergence of a Jewish state, who for the time being regarded as desirable the creation of a unified community in the United States that would effectively support the state both materially and through influence on the American government. Similarly, many non-Zionist nationalists, thinking along Eastern European lines, regarded as necessary a centralized authority, for it was only thus they thought Jewish survival would be assured.

Most important of all, the last forty years spread a worrisome sense of insecurity through many American ethnic groups. In the face of social changes of unparalleled magnitude, it was difficult to maintain any large semblance of security. As far as the Jews were concerned, the rise of organized anti-Semitism at home and abroad was shocking; the enormous dislocations of place and of status through which many passed in the course of a lifetime were disturbing; and the rapidity with which the social environment changed about them deprived them of the fixed points by which they might judge themselves in their relation to others. Under these circumstances some were fearful. They lost confidence in the capacity of voluntary organizations to deal with the enormous problems before them. They wondered whether Jews really could live an integrated life in the United States with no more protection than these loose spontaneous societies afforded.

Out of this sense of insecurity came the demand for unity; for it was in unity alone, it seemed, that one could find the necessary strength to face the threatening world. Hence the hope that some large authoritative, powerful body might appear to stand between the individual and his potential enemies in other

groups, a body strong enough to impose discipline within its own ranks and to stand up against the hostile forces outside them.

This is a tragic hope. For such a body, speaking under the enforced discipline of "unity" with "one voice" for all Jews, would not quiet, but would feed the insecurity which brought it into being. Fortunately no such body is likely to appear. The freedom and fluidity of American life appear as capable now, as they have been in the past, of encouraging the spontaneous voluntary association. And most Jews, like most other Americans, still have confidence in the capacity of such associations, not as official agencies, but as representatives only of their own members, to deal with the recurrent problems of a diverse society. Above all, in the United States today, the vast majority of Jews do have confidence that they can settle persisting frictions, misunderstandings, discrimination, and injustices by the mutual approaches of their associations and those of their neighbors. That method has worked magnificently in the past; it has, most feel, unlimited creative possibilities for the future.

THE clamorous argument over the nature of the work by Jews in the community relations field becomes more comprehensible in this context. The apparent inconsistency and the lack of blueprint-clarity in the structure of these agencies are the results of the way in which they developed. They took on functions and contrived the means of executing them under the pressure of the day-to-day necessity of doing a job. They moved into some areas and not into others out of the interest and capability of their members. If the result is confusing from the engineer's point of view, these organizations have nevertheless been remarkably effective. For they possess the flexibility to adapt themselves to the changing requirements of the society in which they operate.

It is therefore not altogether relevant, in

examining the various agencies, to ask why particular functions should rest where they do. The experts coming in fresh to the subject would no doubt find it difficult to explain, in theoretical terms, why the American Jewish Committee should support a library, or publish a Year Book, or, for that matter, sponsor COMMENTARY. These activities did not emerge from any theoretical or ideological delineation of tasks. They arose over a long period out of Jewish community needs to which the members of the Committee felt sensitive and which they were anxious to satisfy.

The outcome may, in particular cases, involve some overlapping or duplication of effort. Where that is clearly the case, it is certainly undesirable. But these conditions are not likely to be remedied by the arbitrary theoretical schemes of experts—and even less by the unrealistic community schemes of the ideological revolutionaries. Other attempts to achieve institutional mergers or to discover areas of cooperation or joint work have come only as a result of the patient collaboration of devoted men willing to mark off the boundaries of the areas in which they agree, but willing to recognize those in which they remain free to disagree, and to stay separate and distinct.

This is the only way in which, in America, we can make progress in improving the work of voluntary organizations. For in the end, that authority to govern voluntary organizations which various elements in Jewish life passionately desire to see established is a contradiction in terms. Such authority can only be exercised so long as those under it consider it beneficial to their work and are willing to accept it—just as these voluntary organizations in turn will function only so long as those who came together to found them wish to continue maintaining and supporting them, and working under their aegis to fulfill American Jewish communal ends and aspirations.